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Reserve

EXTENDING ECONOMIC INFORMATION TO FARM PEOPLE\*

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The Outlook Conference is always one of the most important meetings that extension workers participate in. This year it has more than the usual significance because we are closing the chapter of war production and are looking ahead to the postwar years. This has been the import of Secretary Anderson's message this evening. He has gone beyond the immediate outlook and has challenged our thinking on the more fundamental aspects regarding future agricultural policy. I think we will all agree that he has outlined a sound platform upon which the agriculture of the postwar years can well be based. It is a statement of principles that will meet the approval of the farm people of the country. He has said that it is the first duty of agriculture to be productive; that this production should be efficient production; and lastly, that we must have an up-to-date price and income policy that will be based upon fair prices to the producer, and fair prices to the consumer, to the end that agriculture will receive its fair share of the national income.

All three of these statements are in accord with farmer thinking. Farmers want to produce. They know how to make the earth yield and they believe that food and fiber should be produced in an amount adequate to give the people of this country a diet that will meet decent nutritional standards and enough more to furnish the amount necessary for normal export requirements. Farmers would like to keep their production at a level that will use their land, labor, and equipment in an efficient manner. They do not look with favor upon a program of restricted production.

They also believe in efficient production. They have applied the results of science and technology to their farm practice to an amazing degree. Today the lag between the results of research and their application on the farm has been shortened remarkably. Extension workers can take justifiable pride in this technological advancement because through the years they have worked closely with farm people in all these activities.

But farmers have the feeling that full production and efficient production may not be the complete answer to their basic problems in the years immediately ahead. They are genuinely concerned about what the future may have in store for them. They wonder if surpluses will again become unmanageable. They wonder whether production control will again be necessary, or at worst whether they may have to face another debacle similar to that of the thirties.

Very frankly, we do not dare go through another such ordeal. We must have an agricultural policy that will make those things impossible in the future. As the Secretary has well said, it is time to look ahead and go to work on what the policy is to be. In the final analysis that policy will be determined by what the farm people of this country think it should be. It will not be made by the United States Department of Agriculture or the land-grant colleges.

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This does not mean that we do not have a contribution to make. We do, and an important one. As an Extension Service we have the very real responsibility of bringing to farm people the basic economic information that they will ask for in their consideration of the many proposals that are being advanced to maintain agricultural income after the present support prices are withdrawn. In bringing this kind of information to them it is not our province to tell farmers what to think or how to think, or to give them ready-made answers. It is our responsibility nevertheless to give them the kind of information that is essential to a full consideration of the basic facts that must underlie any agricultural policy. In so doing, Extension, as the educational arm of the Department and the land-grant colleges, will be carrying out an assignment which falls clearly within its responsibility. It is without reservation the most important assignment that should engage our resources in the years immediately ahead. This is true because the framing of an agricultural policy is the most important problem facing farm people.

The importance of this problem was recognized in the recent report of the Policy Committee of the Land Grant College Association. On a broader scale than ever before, they define the obligations of the land grant colleges in this field. They have challenged the extension services so to organize themselves that they can undertake their full share of this task. Their report makes the following positive statement concerning postwar extension teaching:

"It is especially necessary that those who are responsible for extension policy make certain that in the years ahead their programs give emphasis to these public policy questions. In most States this decision will require broad adjustments in the whole extension program, and will necessitate the allocation of more personnel and funds to this field. It will also mean that special attention be given to determining how this type of educational material can best be made available to farmers and families."

This is a responsibility that the Extension Service cannot take lightly. It will call for courage and conviction; but well done, it will be the most significant contribution that extension workers can make to the welfare of farm people in the immediate future, and one that will have an even greater influence in the years ahead.

If we are to accept this challenge and seriously attempt to carry out this important assignment, it will be necessary for us to take stock of our resources and begin to strengthen ourselves where necessary. Very frankly, we shall have to admit that we are not as well equipped as we should be at the present time to assume educational leadership in presenting economic information to farm people. Too many of our agents lack the necessary basic training in economics, political science, and related subjects. They are not trained to discuss these subjects with the same confidence with which they discuss livestock and crop production, plant and animal diseases, and farm management.

If the handling of economic information is to assume an increasingly important place in the agent's program--and I think it is--we must take the necessary steps to better prepare him for such work. From the long-time viewpoint we must begin now to overhaul the undergraduate training for county extension work. We must ask for more than the 4-year training period. A 4-year course



is no longer sufficient to equip the present-day extension worker. He needs the present 4-year course to get his basic training in the agricultural sciences, and he needs at least an additional year to give him the necessary foundation in economics, political science, marketing, and distribution.

Whether this additional year should immediately follow his 4 years of regular college work or be taken after an apprenticeship period as an assistant agent, is a matter for further discussion. The point I am trying to make is that extension work of tomorrow will require a high quality of personnel, with the type of worker who can give educational leadership to those larger questions in the realm of public policy. Such leadership will require workers with more training, and somewhat different training, than has been considered necessary in the past.

I would not imply that we must wait until we are more sure of our ground before we begin to direct more extension effort toward these activities. There is much that we can do now if we have the purpose to do so. For one thing, we can strengthen our specialist staff in economics and marketing. This obligation is pointed out to us in the recent Bankhead-Flannagan legislation. Strengthening the specialist staff is a matter of immediate concern and is perhaps the first step that we can take that will be of positive help at the present time.

We have other tools with which to work. We have personnel in all agricultural counties in the United States. We can do much through in-service training to strengthen our county workers. We have at our disposal the resources of the land-grant colleges and the Department of Agriculture, and we can call upon the subject-matter people in our respective colleges to help train our present staff. We also have the confidence of farm people. They have come to recognize the extension worker as the source of unbiased information. We have large numbers of intelligent volunteer leaders. We have a far-flung organization that reaches down into almost every rural neighborhood.

These are all resources of great value. Many of them have been years in the building. If we will use the resources now at our disposal, imperfect though they be in some respects, we can make a worth-while contribution and be reasonably effective in handling economic information and discussing economic subjects with our farm people. It will not be necessary to wait until we bring about those desirable and long-range improvements that are concerned with the basic training of extension workers.

I am convinced that this is possible because of some experiences we have had in our own States. During the past several years one of our specialists has conducted what we called a group discussion project with farmers on economic subjects. One of these topics dealt with the farmer's interest in foreign trade and specifically the reciprocal trade agreement policy. Recently one of our farm organizations was asked to sound out farm opinion on the continuation of the reciprocal trade agreement program. When they polled all their county officers as to farmer thinking on this question, they were told that Minnesota farmers were in favor of a continuation of the reciprocal trade agreement program on the basis of its contribution to increased total trade and larger farm markets. We took some pride in the results of this poll because we thought it demonstrated the effectiveness of the discussion methods of presenting educational material on economic subjects. Given the facts and an opportunity to discuss them back



and forth, farmers will generally come up with an answer that is not based solely upon selfish interest, but is rather keyed to the national welfare.

We have also carried on similar discussion on the subject of inflation, especially in its relation to land values, as, of course, you have done in your States. We believe that our farmers are holding the line reasonably well on farm land values and that their judgment is based on sound economic information. I think we can carry on the same kind of discussion on such questions as parity prices, support prices for agricultural products, the relation of consumer purchasing power to farm prices, and the other subjects that are fundamental to an intelligently conceived agricultural policy.

If we are to go into this program it will mean much work on the part of our economics staff to develop subject-matter outlines for discussion meetings, to train our county personnel in using the discussion method and in handling the subject matter, to strengthen our specialist staff to give leadership to this program, and to enlist the full support and cooperation of the subject-matter people in our respective colleges.

We are in a transition period as far as extension is concerned. The pressure for maximum war production is past. Efficient production will, of course, always be a major extension goal. Soil conservation, farm management, and marketing will assume increasingly important places in our program, but above all these the major issue now confronting farm people is in the field of agricultural policy making. If we do not accept this responsibility in Extension, we shall be abdicating the most important educational job to be done with farmers in the immediate postwar period. Upon the right kind of policy that will bring to agriculture its rightful share of the national income will depend the standard of living that we can expect for farm people. It will determine how much education their children will receive, what contributions they can make to society in general, the extent to which they can be the customers of industry, and whether or not a share of the capable young people growing upon our farms will continue to look to farming as a desirable occupation.

It would seem paramount then, that much of our extension effort in the years ahead should be devoted to these larger questions, which must be brought to a satisfactory solution if extension work in other fields is to have meaning. Clearly the Secretary in his speech this evening and in other talks that he has recently made is challenging farm people to examine carefully the basic factors that should go into the making of an agricultural policy. As the educational arm of the Department and the land-grant colleges, the Extension Service should qualify itself to make a substantial contribution in this field.